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ABSTRACT

The Academic Advancement Co-operative, a student-to-student assistance program designed to provide increased opportunity for academic achievement among students at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, has operated successfully for more than 2 years, during which time it has been of service to a great many college students. As a Federally-funded model program, its main contribution has been to shed some light on the feasibility and practicality of such an innovative program and to provide experience that may prove useful to those in other institutions who wish to establish similar academic assistance programs. As the evaluation presented in the present report shows, the program, while successful and rewarding to all who participated, fell far short of its anticipated aims. However, as the result of this experience, the dynamics of a student-to-student assistance program are now much better understood, and it is anticipated that this knowledge will prove useful, and will be widely disseminated. (Author/HS)

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November 1972

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PREFACE

The Academic Advancement Co-operative - a student-to-student assistance program designed to provide increased opportunity for academic achievement among students at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh - has operated successfully for more than two years, during which time it has been of service to a great many college students. As a Federally-funded model program, its main contribution has been to shed some light on the feasibility and practicality of such an innovative program, and to provide experience that may prove useful to those in other institutions who wish to establish similar academic assistance programs. As this report will show, the program, while successful and rewarding to all who participated, nevertheless fell far short of its anticipated aims. However, as a result of this experience, the dynamics of a student-to-student assistance program are now much better understood, and it is anticipated that this knowledge will prove useful, and will be widely disseminated.

The list of all those who contributed substantially to the development of the original idea of the Academic Assistance Program, and to the continuing development and maintenance of the program itself, is very long; but special recognition should be accorded to the faculty advisor of the program, Mary Hartig, Instructor in the Department of Education, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, and to Kathy Kiedrowski, former staff member of UW-O, who is responsible more than any other person for the original idea and program proposal. Special acknowledgement should also be accorded to Dr. Neville Bennington, UW-O Co-ordinator of Research, who related to student leaders most effectively throughout the duration of this project.

A great many student leaders - many more than can be mentioned here - also deserve special mention for dedicated service and persistence in the face of obstacles. Outstanding student leadership was shown by Patti Bentzler, Daniel Burrus, Daniel Diener, William Gray and Scott Heatwole, all of whom at one time or another carried the major responsibility for the success of the program.

The purpose of this research project was to establish a model program for developing a student initiated and operated organization designed to provide special academic services and facilities that would be available to any college student at University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh who needed assistance in achieving academic success. This student organization was called the Academic Advancement Cooperative (AAC) and was incorporated as an autonomous student organization receiving the full endorsement and cooperation of the student government, faculty, and administration.

PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

At University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, as at other state universities throughout the country, a continuing problem is that of how to provide maximum opportunity for academic success for a large proportion of students who come to college poorly prepared to do college work and who often are uncertain of their academic goals and purposes. The university provides many student services, of course, such as a fully staffed couseling center, a reading improvement laboratory, and extensive facilities for professional academic advisement and program planning. Most academic departments also provide for a certain amount of orientation as part of their freshman introductory courses. And many orientation publications are produced for student use, such as a student handbook, a library handbook, and numerous information sheets and publications produced by various departments and organizations. But it was felt that more could and should be done to maximize the chances for student success.

The specific objectives of the AAC project included the following:

1. To provide individual students with a unique opportunity to engage in academically stimulating relationships with other students without faculty supervision.

2. To give students an opportunity to engage in activities that will raise their level of aspiration by involving them in a helping relationship with other students who need help.

3. To provide an autonomous student organization which will offer a variety of opportunities to develop leadership skills and the ability to be of service to others.

A special interest in the concept of student-to-student assistance resulted from experience in a federally and state funded project conducted by Dr. David Bowman, Dean of the School of Education, to give special assistance to students in academic difficulty. In this successful project, many students became aware of the relationship with other students. This awareness led to the development of the Academic Advancement Cooperative.

The AAC had been in existence for approximately one year at UW-O, prior to the awarding of the grant but was not able, for lack of funds, to conduct a full scale student assistance program. A small group of students, however, kept the idea alive and maintained a nucleus learning center which was expanded rapidly when funds became available.

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

It was felt that the research project described in the proposal represented an innovative and timely solution to the above described problem of student attrition for which there was little or no precedent in research literature. Essentially, the research intended to test the feasibility of developing a model student-to-student academic assistance program which was essentially unique in that it was basically voluntary and was directed and operated as an autonomous student organization. This organization was designed to provide academic counseling activities and opportunities on a voluntary basis to any UW-O student who enrolled. Specifically, the activities of the AAC focused on the development of an already-established learning center that was made regularly available to enroll students in the organization and to arrange for introduction between students needing assistance and students willing and able to give assistance. The learning center provided a place for student-to-student conferences and maintained a variety of course-related materials and equipment useful in the academic assistance process. Meetings of the organization were held to acquaint the members with the services of the association and to provide for communication between the student officers and the membership.

The learning center also provided materials for special assistance in specific courses offered at UW-O, and in addition offered a tutoring program in various subject areas. It also functioned as the enrollment office for the organization and to some extent as a conference room.

A student board of directors of five or more members planned and directed the activities of the organization, appointing a Coordinator and a Director of Research whose duties were to coordinate the work of student volunteers and to provide for necessary promotion and information needed for recruiting membership, with the assistance of a secretary-stenographer who managed the enrollment

office, prepared publicity materials, and kept the necessary records on all of the activities of the organization. All members of the AAC were also to be available for various kinds of service to the organization on a volunteer basis since one of the major incentives of membership was the opportunity to be of service to fellow students. The emphasis in the promotion of the activity was on the fact that students receive personal benefits on a mutual, cooperative basis. Being of service to others and being served by others were seen as reciprocal activities, indivisible in practice.

In brief the learning center was designed to provide:

1. Study skills improvement materials including special course related materials such as sample tests, class notes, assignment sheets, and course syllabi.

2. Facilities for arranging student-to-student academic assistance conferences between students with similar interests and academic goals.

3. Information and assistance to individual or groups of students interested in developing student initiated research projects and proposals.

4. Information and advice regarding individual academic programs and catalogue requirements.

5. Information and personal introduction to student services available on campus.

STATISTICAL EVALUATION

The proposal originally expressed the intention of conducting a statistical evaluation of the project complete with control groups, in order to establish whether or not the program was effective in raising levels of student academic performance. However, the late Dr. Joseph Kurnin, then head of the small grants division, advised against such a study.

It was his view that the basic research question was not whether student-to-student assistance is effective. That had already been rather well established in various contexts. Rather, the purpose would be to explore organizational and administrative problems that may arise in the implementation of a student-directed assistance program. The objective was to establish a model program rather than to carry out an experimental design.

This model program was to have a duration of one school year at the end of which time a number of evaluations were to be conducted to determine the extent to which members participated in the program

and the specific kinds of educational services that were provided then.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Board of Directors. The affairs of the organization were at all times under the direction and guidance of a small group of students that varied between five and twelve. This group was called the Board of Directors and was elected in accordance with the by-laws by the general membership of the Co-op.

Students of high, average and somewhat below average in academic ability were represented on the Board. This heterogeneity was in itself a positive asset, but due to the small number of people involved there was at times a lack of the image hoped for in the original proposal. Specifically, the core members were supposed to function as identity figures or role models that low achievers could identify with, to raise their level of aspiration and performance. The single biggest failing and problem of the whole research project centers around this lack of sufficient numbers of superior students in the leadership. Further, committees did not function very effectively, because the leadership was unable to convince a sufficient number of people that they should become more involved.

Tutoring Program. One of the most important and potentially useful services offered by the Co-op was the tutoring program. The tutors came from the general membership and were simply asked upon joining if they felt they could possibly instruct someone else in a subject they were proficient in. Their names were then filed by subject, and when a student requested a tutor in a given subject, he was given the name of the tutor and they arranged their own meeting place and time at their convenience.

Tutors

End of 71/72 school year - 156 on file
Middle of 1st semester 72 - 124 on file
(each tutor instructs average of two subjects)

On the whole, the tutoring was successful. An average week would see six to eight people requesting help, but as exam times neared and some students realized how far behind they were, the demand for tutoring services doubled and tripled. In most cases, the request for a tutor was satisfied, since there were over 35 broad subject areas covered. But for some upper level or special courses having few enrollments, no tutors could be found.

One of the difficulties experienced with this program was in the area of maintaining communications after the person requesting assistance had left the learning center. The students were

requested to keep the secretary posted as to whether or not they had met with a tutor, and to indicate whether they had been helped or not, but many students did not provide this information. Presumably everything went to their satisfaction because they did not come back requesting a different tutor.

Test File. One of the most frequently used services the Co-op offered to students was the test file. By studying previous tests administered by a professor the student is better able to understand which areas of the course that particular professor deems most important. Consequently, the student can then emphasize that material in his studies, and avoid the common mistake of studying the wrong material. Unfortunately, some students misused the test file because they did not understand its purpose. They only used the file to get answers and not as a study aid.

The tests in the file at the learning center cover 120 courses by various profs and number over 935. All the tests were brought in by Co-op members and donated to the file. Although a few professors would guard their tests as if they were crown jewels, many instructors utilized the test as a learning tool and handed the exam back to the students for further use and reference. It was from these tests that the file was compiled.

Teacher Evaluation. One of the more disturbing aspects of college education for many students is the process of signing up for classes. When two or more instructors are teaching the same course and the student is unfamiliar with those teachers it becomes difficult to make any sort of choice, let alone an intelligent one, concerning which professor to take. All too often the student must resort to a "Russian roulette" type of decision-making process that frequently gives less than desired results.

This being the case, the Co-op thought that a fair, comprehensive evaluating instrument for professors was needed and attempted to devise one. The task proved too much, however. Given the manpower limitations, the small percentage of the student body involved in the Co-op and the awesome complexity of the task it was impossible to accomplish the goal.

At various times teachers were asked if they would consent to being evaluated and the Co-op membership in turn was asked to fill out evaluations but the samplings for any one instructor were too incomplete to be reliable and consequently the effort was shelved.

Facilities. The Co-op was given the use of two rooms for the duration of the project. One was a classroom with two desks, tables and chairs, bookcases and blackboard. The other was a small office across the hall. Both rooms were centrally located in the basement of the new library building and proved quite satisfactory.

The larger room was utilized as a learning center, and it was there that the majority of the group activities took place. The various services were housed there and the secretary had her desk there. The smaller office was utilized as a study and private conference room where tutors would often meet with their students.

CONCLUSIONS

During the course of the project the AAC attracted many students for a variety of reasons. Some were drawn by the opportunity to be of service and to take part in the organizing and planning of the organization's activities. Others were attracted by the personalities in the program, and joined for the primarily social reasons of friendship and a sense of belonging. But most were motivated by a desire to receive one or another of the academic services offered by the Co-op. This latter group constituted a 95-98% majority of the membership except during the first few weeks of the project.

Membership

End of first semester 71	-	189
End of second semester 72	-	391
Middle of first semester 72	-	370

In spite of several rather well-conducted membership drives, the organization was never able to draw more than four percent of the university's student population into the program. Most members seemed to be more interested in getting something than in giving something. These figures represent the crux of the problem that plagued the Co-op from the beginning. Those in need of strong, highly motivated, successful students to identify with far exceeded the number of those highly motivated successful students who could function as "identifying figures." The membership was excessively bottom heavy. The Board of Directors - the remaining three to five percent of the membership - was not strong enough to lift such a heavy weight.

The original premise of this student-to-student assistance program may have been faulty. It was assumed by the proposers that many low-achieving college students would welcome an opportunity to help other students academically, and that in this process their own motivation and self-confidence would be improved. This kind of student interaction did not appear to take place, at least in any noticeable way. Rather, very few students undertook to establish a "teaching" or "advising" relationship with other students. There may be a number of reasons for this failure. For example, many college students today - even teachers in training- are confused about the issue of authority versus authoritarianism. They are very reluctant to assume leadership roles because they are afraid that to do so amounts to an attempt to "impose their values" on someone else.

Teaching is perceived as authoritarian behavior. The "do your own thing" ethic has made it almost impossible, perhaps, for one student to assist another student in his school work. This phenomenon has been remarked by a number of observers, who have seen in this attitude a problem in teacher training.

Another possible explanation of the failure of the Co-op to develop in the manner anticipated may be found in the widespread feeling among college students, even among academically successful ones, that educational achievement is not really valuable. Many students believe, often passionately, that they do not really need a college education, although they do need a college degree, "in order to get a job." The students who hold this view most strongly are probably the ones who are marginal students. But they do not believe that they need help in becoming better students; they may even doubt that they can become better students. Their perception is that if they need help at all, they need help in learning how to "beat the system." This anti-establishment, anti-educational and anti-intellectual attitude was frequently expressed by members of the Co-op, even by the leadership. In fact, one of the favorite advertising slogans used to promote membership was "Beat the System - Join the Co-op." No doubt the Co-op leaders who used this appeal were unaware that the slogan is a direct contradiction of the basic premise of the Co-op, which is to work within the system, to make the system work.

The psychologist Julian Rotter has an Internality-Externality scale which he has been administering to college students for ten years or more. He reports that college students have been changing substantially in their response to this scale, so that today a large proportion of the college population is significantly more "external." This means that they do not believe that they have much control over their own behavior, or much power to change their behavior. According to Rotter, (reported in Psychology Today magazine, December, 1972) college students today suffer from feelings of "powerlessness," and this has reduced their effectiveness as students and learners. There actually does appear to be a "retreat from rationality" as several observers have reported. It may be that this kind of externality also operated against the effective functioning of the Co-op. Perhaps the goals of the Co-op - academic achievement and improvement in study and learning - were themselves perceived by many students as being somehow invalid or unrealistic.

Thus it may be that there is some hidden attitude or some "do your own thing" ethic or value, widely prevalent among today's college students, that militates against the success of any student-to-student program. If and when this popular value changes, so that students once again place a very high value on learning itself, and not just on the acquisition of a college degree, it may be that student-to-student assistance programs will be more effective. And, in fact, such a changed attitude seems now to be taking place. The sudden drop in college enrollments is seen widely as reflecting two

factors - college is no longer needed as a means for escaping the draft, and parents are no longer so universally convinced that higher education is a good financial investment. Both of these factors suggest that some of the "anti-intellectual" students will no longer be found in attendance.

Students' apathy must not be blamed entirely for the failure of the Co-op idea to live up to expectations. Undoubtedly the major problem was a continuing lack of effective leadership. Perhaps the greatest error made by the Co-op was built into the original by-laws, which provide for the democratic election of student members to the Board of Directors, without any qualifications for such positions being specified. As a result, just about anyone who indicated interest could be elected to the board, even though he may have had no real leadership potential whatsoever. Because the board lacked enough dynamic and dedicated people, the Co-ordinator of the organization often was unable to get sufficient co-operation from anybody to carry out in a consistent manner the ongoing activities and plans of the Co-op.

If a real effort had been made from the start to recruit individuals of exceptional leadership qualities to be board members, putting it on the idealistic basis of "volunteers in service to their fellow students," it seems quite likely that the organization might have been much more effective. Marginal students are for the most part so busy trying to keep their own heads above water that they are simply unable - however willing they may be - to be of much assistance to other students who need help.

Future efforts of the Academic Advancement Co-operative will center upon the effort to recruit a nuclear group of genuinely "high-powered" students who may be able to give the organization the spark of vital fire that it has always lacked. With new ideas and dedication the original conception of co-operation to achieve academic advancement may yet be realized.